DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 202 076 CS 503 381

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TITLE Using the Burkeian Pentad in Giving the Speech Student a Better Understanding of the Communication Act.
PUB DATE [81]
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Communication Association (Pittsburgh, PA, April 24-26, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; *Communication (Thought Transfer); Persuasive Discourse; *Rhetorical Criticism; Skill Development; *Social Behavior; *Speech Communication; *Speech Instruction; *Theories
IDENTIFIERS *Burke (Kenneth)

ABSTRACT

Kenneth Burke, whose positions have served as the basis for countless research projects in speech communication, believes that people are actors acting out life in the social drama with the purpose of achieving the ultimate good. Considering speakers as actors centers attention on the analysis of individuals in terms of their actions as actors and takes into account the parts they play, what their actions are, what dialogue they use, the scene, and their purpose relative to the play as a whole. Burke's pentad theory gives basic speech students means by which to analyze the communicative event from five interrelated points of view: (1) act (what takes place), (2) scene (environment), (3) agent (who carries out the action), (4) agency (the means used to carry it out), and (5) purpose (the speaker's goals). This theory gives students a stronger theoretical base in communication, from which they begin to develop their own personal theory for each communication occurrence that will say something about their general philosophy, values, and attitudes. The theory also accords them a more thorough knowledge of speech criticism, with which they can observe their speech performances, note the discrepancy between what is and what could be, and hypothesize what changes would bridge the gap. (HTH)

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USING THE BURKEIAN PENTAD IN GIVING THE SPEECH STUDENT A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE COMMUNICATION ACT

by

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ECA 1981 Meeting
Pittsburgh

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Speech communication is the field which has as its primary subject matter the study and practice of the spoken language. Since nonverbal aspects of human communication frequently intertwine with verbal, speech also delves into this nonverbal element.[1] Following quite simply then is the notion that the beginning collegiate speech course should give the student increasing knowledge of and practice in the spoken language, as well as facets of communication closely allied with the spoken language.

At least one way to determine the types of ideas taught in the basic Speech class is to examine the textbooks used for that class. The most popular texts take pretty much of a traditional approach based on the classical canons complemented by recent research findings.[2] A methodology given little attention has been the dramatistic; more specifically, Kenneth Burke's positions, which have served as the basis for countless research projects in the speech communication field over the last 30 years, receive scant notice in the texts.

Burke believes that the nature of man may be described best through a dramatistic metaphor: man is an actor who acts out his life in the social drama with the purpose of achieving the ultimate good. While considering the speaker as a speaker allows one to analyze that person in terms of her/his personality, considering the speaker as an actor centers attention on the analysis of the individual in terms of her/his actions as an actor. Moreover, it is difficult to think of analyzing an actor without also taking account of the part being played, what her/his acts are, what dialogue s/he uses, the scene in which all this takes place, and the purpose of her/his part relative to the play as a whole.[3]

In helping the student to understand the speech act then, or any communicative act for that matter, Burke offers the pentad. The pentad gives the student the means by which to analyze the communicative event from five inter-related points of view: (1) act--what takes place; (2) scene--the environment surrounding the act; (3) agent--who carries out the action; (4) agency--the means used to carry it out; and (5) purpose--the goal toward which the agent acts.[4]

These are terms to be applied to different aspects of an event only after close examination of the event; they cannot be assigned "a priori." For instance, in one case a speech may constitute the act and a television camera may serve as an agency used to carry that speech to millions of individuals. Yet from another viewpoint the speech itself may be viewed as the agency through which a particular plea is made. And the camera may be viewed as part of the scene which has a distinct effect on the speaker or agent.[5]

Moreover, among the five terms ratios exist which have rhetorical significance. Thus, certain agencies may often be used by certain agents; certain scenes may frequently be accompanied by particular acts. In addition to these two, the pentad allows for eight others: scene-agent, scene-agency, scene-purpose, act-purpose, act-agent, act-agency, agent-purpose, and agency-purpose. Further a causal relationship occurs between the two terms of each ratio; the scene-act ratio, for example, indicates that a certain type of scene calls for a particular type of act.[6] An illustration of this notion occurred recently when some speakers declared that, due to the depressed national economic scene, President Reagan should declare an economic emergency; the scene demanded that a specific act be carried out, according to these speakers' point of view.

Still further, according to Burkeian theory, individuals in looking at each event in their lives, tend to feature or stress the pentadic element which seems most important. And there is a consistency here; the disposition to explain

most things in life with one featured element serves as the hub of an ideology for most people.[7] Hence idealists feature the agent since they believe that the person's motives are controlled by the agent's attitudes, values and opinions. Materialists stress the scene because of their conviction that an individual's motives are determined by people, events and ideas existent in the individual's environment.[8]

While Burke deals predominantly with different philosophies in his discussions of featured pentadic terms, similarities can be viewed in rhetorical approaches as well. For example, Lloyd Bitzer's emphasis upon the rhetorical situation features the scene as controlling motive while Walter Fisher's "motive view" of communication stresses purpose as the crucial pentadic element.[9]

The example of the ongoing gay rights controversy indicates the great difference the featured pentadic term can make in one's view of contemporary social issues. Barry Brummett notes that the antagonists in this dispute both emphasize a ratio between act and agent: "the world is the way it is, and people are what they are and do what they do, because of the relationship between people and their actions.[10] Yet pro-gay rights communicators feature the agent: people are what they are and should be taken on their own terms. An agent should not be discriminated against because s/he happens to be gay. "Acts are derivative from agents; people do what they do because of the kinds of people they find themselves to be."[11] Communicators opposed to gay rights, in arguing to the contrary, feature the act. A person is what s/he is because of her/his acts; people are basically malleable. An individual is gay because of what s/he does, and what s/he does is not acceptable in our society. With this viewpoint, acts are primary and it is the agents that are derivative.[12]

With all of the above material on Burke's pentad in mind, the abutting question for consideration here is: what if any value does all this have for

the student in the basic speech course? It is this paper's contention that there are indeed two closely related values: (1) the student is given a stronger theoretical base in communication and (2) he/she also is accorded a more thorough knowledge of speech criticism.

In respect to the first point, the complaint has been lodged that, if textbooks can be a guideline, most students in the basic course receive an impoverished grounding in speech communication theory. The authors generally present a set of standard "good" but superficial practices; they rely on habitual answers which usually fail to come from an integrated theoretical position. Frequently these answers are selected from a mixture of theoretical and common sense motions. The principles articulated are didactic ones, sometimes so cut off from any foundation that students have little opportunity to evaluate them critically; they may disagree but in doing so do not have much chance to use the reasoning process.[13]

The proposed solution to the aforementioned weaknesses includes more emphasis on improving students' thinking, expression and attitudes. Due to changing life situations, students should be presented with not just what to learn but how to learn, that is, the ability to think through situations, rejecting inappropriate communication principles and developing fresh ones. Education in specific communication skills is not nearly enough. The students should have certain analytic abilities before they can make the most effective use of behavioral abilities. They should be able to discern judiciously between different situations and people before making a decision on what type of communicative act is the most appropriate.[14]

The potential for Burke's pentad to address itself to these issues has already been noted, albeit briefly, in a recent piece of research on rhetorical invention.[15] Certainly a student cannot simply select a communication situation and with little effort apply the pentadic terms to various phases

of that situation. Only after a thorough study of those phases and their inter-relationship can the individual begin to apply the Burkeian terminology and determine which pentadic ratio is prevalent, which of the five elements is featured, what relevance each of the pentadic terms has for the communication circumstances at hand. In a sense the speech student takes one grand theory, Burkeian, and from that develops her/his own personal theory for each happening encountered.

The process can be illustrated by a student Mike Smith preparing an address advocating the legalization of marijuana. Smith could consider himself as agent, his overt advocacy the act, his non-verbal and verbal means of communication as agency while his purpose would be to convince his listeners of the efficacy of his position, with the scene being the environment surrounding the issue. Because of his close association with that environment Smith might consider himself (agent) also as part of the scene. Moreover, the means of communication (agency) could also be viewed as a major factor integral with his advocacy (act). And convincing his listeners (purpose) in the long run for Smith might be a means (agency) to a larger purpose, the actual legislating making marijuana legal. These represent just a few examples of how one motivational factor may account for more than a simple pentadic element. There are numerous other possibilities, possibilities which along with the factors already mentioned would make a significant difference in the communicative strategy Smith employed.

An additional element having considerable effect upon the situation would be the pentadic term featured. If agent were featured, for instance, Smith might start from the premise that it was primarily his own personal feelings and beliefs that were prompting his address; he should stand up for what he personally feels is right. On the other hand, if Smith were responding predominantly to the environment with its sets of conflicting laws on the issue,

its vastly different treatment of various citizens for basically the same "offense," its conflicting research findings relating to the subject, then he could consider scene the featured term. In any case, whichever of the five terms is featured will say a lot to Smith about his own philosophy and thus how he handles the communication situation.

To gain an even further understanding of his motivation in the situation, Smith also needs to investigate the predominant pentadic ratio existent. He could conclude that the scene, as described above, has demanded that the act be performed, that is, the overt advocacy of marijuana legalization.[16] It might be that the scene has called for the agent, Smith, who feels so strongly about the topic, to become involved. Or, in order to fulfill the purpose, legalization, acts like the one he is carrying out are necessary. These and other potential ratios need to be examined in order to give Smith the best possible comprehension of the potential discourse in which he plans to involve himself.

Burke's pentad then gives the student the opportunity to develop a clearly defined theory about each communication situation entered. Yet this theory cannot be isolated; it says something about the student's general philosophy, values, and attitudes. It can give the individual a clearer understanding of her/himself and thus a keener grasp of the reasons for the rhetorical choices made in her/his life.

In addition to giving the student a richer theoretical base in communication, the pentad also accords the student, as stated earlier in the essay, a more thorough knowledge of speech criticism. And in the basic Speech course it is indeed criticism that allows the student to progress, to improve her/his communicative behavior. By learning effective critical skills, the student with the help of the instructor can observe her/his own speech performance, note the discrepancy between what is and what could be and hypothesize that a certain change would bridge the gap.[16]

The fact that Burke's pentad has served as a basis for so many rhetorical criticisms during recent decades gives added credence to its usefulness in this area. Just as the pentadic notions have been applied in those cases, so could they be adapted to student speaking in the classroom.

For instance, the featured pentadic term or ratio of the speaker says much about the type of language used in the presentation and vice-versa. The vocabulary employed and the ways in which that vocabulary is put together can offer the student a clearer understanding of her/his own motivation and strategy. Joan Brown, in arguing for legalized prostitution, might find herself frequently using terms such as "human rights," "privileges," "freedom," "person's privacy," and thus would have an indication that the agent was playing a significant part in her thinking and could be the featured term. On the other hand, in opposing legalized prostitution she might use such language as "immoral deed," "unacceptable behavior," "objectionable activity," all alluding to the act as the possible feature. In either case, in criticizing her rhetoric Brown needs to ask herself questions like: (1) what do those key words say about her own ideology; (2) how are they working persuasively; (3) is she personally satisfied with what her language is conveying.

While the example above, as virtually all the published Burkeian criticisms, deals with a persuasive question, it is possible that the pentad could also be helpful in analyzing speeches traditionally labeled as informative or even entertaining. Such analyses might shed light on the nature of the language employed in these types of discourses. Moreover, other questions could be asked in classifying types of speakers, including the strategy and tactics they employ; for example, could any generalizations be made about language usage by students with particular social and political views? Still further, audiences and situations could be considered; is there a certain environment that seems to lend itself to the adoption of a particular featured pentadic term or ratio?[17]

Still another major concern in any criticism of a student's work, especially using a Burkeian method, has to do with ethical standards. Since Burke states that the ultimate goal of all communication should be cooperation between human beings and thus a better society for all, any analysis using his method would have to make ethics a major consideration. And clearly the pentadic term or ratio featured by a speaker can say much about that speaker's values and how those values are applied in our society.[18]

The Burkeian notions discussed in this essay have been offered in an exploratory vein; certainly substantial refining needs to be accomplished before the proposals suggested here can be put into practice. Moreover, there are undoubtedly many who feel that the project is too ambitious for a beginning speech student; that student has all s/he can do to become proficient in the skills and mechanics of effective oral communication without having to develop a theory based upon her/his own thoughts and rational processes.[19] The opposing view states that while speaking skills are necessary, so is the intellectual exercise which can aid a student in the making of important and meaningful statements; through inquiry, reflection and the discovery of new knowledge the individual can make a much more substantial spoken contribution to her/his fellow human beings.[20]

Kenneth Burke's pentad provides a strong basis on which the student can build her/his own personal theory of communication and further gives that individual a groundwork to aid in the criticism of the communications once they have been completed. Through a more complete knowledge of discourse then, the person can better understand how to use it effectively and hopefully bring human beings closer together in the pursuit of a richer life.

[1] For a complete discussion of the province of the speech field, see Frank E.X. Dance, "Speech Communication as a Liberal Arts Discipline," Communication Education, 29 (Sept., 1980), 328-31.

[2] The ten most popular texts used in the basic course are listed in: James W. Gibson et al., "The Basic Course in Speech at U.S. Colleges and Universities:III," Communication Education, 29 (January, 1980), 8.

[3] L. Virginia Holland "Kenneth Burke's Dramatistic Approach in Speech Criticism," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 41 (December, 1955), 352, 356.

[4] Kenneth, Burke, A Grammar of Motives (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. xv; see also: L. Virginia Holland, "Kenneth Burke's Theory of Communication," Journal of Communication, 10 (December, 1969), 181; Richard E. Grable and John J. Makay, "Kenneth Burke's Concept of Motives in Rhetorical Theory," Today's Speech, 20 (Winter, 1972), 12.

[5] Grable and Makay, 12.

[6] Marie Hochmuth, "Kenneth Burke and the 'New Rhetoric'," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 38 (April, 1952), 142; Grable and Makay, 12; Burke, p. 15.

[7] Grable and Makay, 14; Barry Brummett, "A Pentadic Analysis of Ideologies in Two Gay Rights Controversies," Central States Speech Journal, 30 (Fall, 1979), 252.

[8] Grable and Makay, 14.

[9] Lloyd Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," Philosophy and Rhetoric, 1 (January, 1968), 1-14; Walter Fisher, "A Motive View of Communication," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 56 (April, 1970), 131-39; Grable and Makay, 14.

[10] Brummett, 252.

[11] Ibid, 252-53.

[12] Brummett, 252, 255.

[13] Stanley Deetz, "Playing Tiddledywinks with Manhole Covers: Modern Theory in the Basic Course," paper presented at 1980 Speech Communication Association Convention, New York, pp. 3-4.

[14] Ibid, pp. 2-4.

[15] Charles W. Kneupper and Floyd D. Anderson, "Uniting Wisdom and Eloquence: The Need for Rhetorical Invention," Quarterly Journal of Speech 66 (October, 1980), 323-24.

[16] Gerald M.Phillips, "Rhetoric and the Proper Study of Man," Communication Education, 27 (September, 1978), 192.

[17] For a discussion of issues such as these, see: Holland, "Speech Criticism," 357.

[18] An excellent example is the current gay rights controversy as discussed earlier in this essay, Brummett, 250-61.

[19] This question is discussed extensively in Kneupper and Anderson, 313-26.

[20] Ibid., esp. 320-21.